



Beyond the Limits of Nature: A Social-ecological Perspective on Degrowth as a Political Ideology

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a critical analysis of the ideological position of degrowth from the perspective of social ecology. It agrees with Giorgios Kallis' call to abolish the growth imperative that capitalism embodies today, but it also presents a critique of the conceptual underpinnings of this notion. More precisely, I argue that degrowth as an ideological platform reproduces a binary conception of society and nature, an oppositional mentality which is a key concept to hierarchical epistemology. Degrowth as a political agenda is thus prone to appropriation to authoritarian ends. In order to temper this tendency and help degrowth as a tool of analysis reach its liberatory potential, I advocate its consideration alongside a social-ecological position.

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Introduction

Following the 2008 global financial collapse, the theoretical position of degrowth has gained significant traction among left-leaning academics and environmental activists (Kallis 2017; Markantonatou 2013). Degrowth argues that a planet of finite resources cannot sustain a social system based on an axiom of ever-increasing material production and consumption (Martinez-Alier 2014). It presents a powerful argument against capitalism, directly challenging economic and scarcity-driven ways of thinking, and thus ought to be taken seriously by the entire spectrum of left ecologists. However, degrowth also departs from conventional ecosocialism in several ways. For example, in "Socialism Without Growth" Kallis (2017) argues that the present ecological crisis demands a break not only with capitalism, but also with socialist growth. He writes:

[I]t is not enough to be agnostic and plan to satisfy the use values of the people of a nation if these use values entail increasing carbon emissions, exhaustion of limited resources, or exploitation of the ecosystems and bodies of others. The

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global material and energy “throughput” has to degrow, starting with those nations that are ecologically indebted to the rest. (Kallis 2017)

In this passage, Kallis rejects the assurances of ecosocialists that an economy organized around use values rather than profit would by definition end exploitation of the natural world. Implicit in Kallis’ argument is the conclusion that in the interest of planetary survival we must privilege the well-being of nature over the needs of society. It is possible that people, not capitalism, might eat us out of house and home.

Kallis’ argument raises the question of what the features are of a social system that meets the criteria of authentic socialism. It also calls to mind the different ways we might conceive of social progress and “growth.” From the standpoint of social ecology, there are several assumptions that I believe are worth interrogating in Kallis’ way of thinking. Is his anxiety that a use-centered economy would “grow” in a capitalistic sense well-founded? Can a society that “grows” (or, more accurately, expands) really be considered socialism? And, if so, what does that say about the relationship between society and nature?

The Conceptual Underpinnings of Degrowth

When historicizing and criticizing growth-centric narratives to adequately answer to these questions, we must examine the conceptual underpinnings of degrowth, which emerged as a proposition two centuries ago in the heart of Western Europe. In 1798, English clerical scholar Thomas Malthus problematized and popularized the notion of “growth” in his now-infamous *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. Malthus cast a dire warning against the rise of industrial society, which he saw as infringing upon the “natural” barriers or “checks” upon human population. In his argument, the depletion of resources is taken as a function from population. According to Malthus ([1798] 1976), “Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will show the immensity of the first power in comparison to the second” (4). In other words, human populations may increase, but the global quantity of available resources remains the same. This is a key concept for anti-growth narratives. The non-human, organic world is defined by limits, like the dimensions of a billiard ball table. Society, on the other hand, is unruly and rapacious. Their uneasy coexistence is maintained only by some external force or internal authority that can keep humanity’s blind, greedy, and self-destructive impulses in check. And this is all true, it seems, by virtue of objective and scientifically verifiable fact.

The picture of an unstable truce between society and nature reemerged in the U.S. and Europe following WWII. In 1972, the elite transnational research

group at the Massachusetts Institute for Technology (MIT), commissioned by the Club of Rome, published *The Limits to Growth*, claiming to have identified the objective boundaries of human consumption. The Club of Rome shifted the “growth” problem onto the terrain of energy and material input, distancing itself from Malthusian population alarmism. Yet it too called upon elites to control the social and reproductive activities of the poor, whose lot in life was cast either directly or indirectly by natural laws.

Debates about population, anti-humanism, and growth percolated throughout the radical ecology movements of the 1970s and 1980s. In a now-infamous essay, deep ecologist, Christopher Manes defended the then-unfolding AIDS crisis as an intervention by “Mother Nature” to bring human life back into “balance” (Gorman 1990). But even more popular outlets subscribed to population alarmism. For example, the journal *Earth-First!* declared injunctions to women against having children, proclaiming, “Love your mother; don’t become one” (Heller 1999, 17).

To combat anti-humanist and anti-civilizational tendencies within the ecology movement, social theorist Murray Bookchin delineated his own views of “social ecology” in sharp opposition to “deep ecology” (Bookchin 1993). Social ecology, he argued, locates the cause of ecological degradation in social institutions rather than population. The central thesis of social ecology is that hierarchical society, not only capitalism, produces the ecological crisis. The ecological crisis thus demands fundamental change to our social relations, from the intimate sphere of sex and gender relations to colonization and political domination on a global scale. Furthermore, Bookchin argued, hierarchical society manifests not only a set of institutions, but also in our ways of thinking and conceiving the world.

By honing a critique of capitalist growth, the degrowth movement has avoided much of the anti-humanism and population alarmism that marred the ecology movement during the 1970s and 1980s. Indeed, scholarly advocates of degrowth today are at the forefront of innovating anti-racist, decolonial, and feminist models of economic valuation. Despite this, as a growth-centered paradigm, the ontology of degrowth recreates a binary, oppositional conception of nature and culture. In doing so, degrowth as a political ideology sets up an appeal to political authority and lends itself to a mentality of hierarchy and domination. The nature-culture binary is a key organizing principle of Western modernity and capitalist society. It is a spatial imaginary wherein nature is located “out there,” external to the realm of human affairs. Society is associated with consciousness, organization, maleness, whiteness, and dominance. Nature, accordingly, is assigned the opposite qualities: passivity, instinct, femaleness, and primitiveness (Heller 1999). Because nature is perceived as a realm governed by scarcity and immutable law, it appears to be simultaneously a danger to society and in need of society’s protection. Degrowth views societal growth (whether capitalist or otherwise) as

inherently encroaching upon nature. This picture obscures the nuanced, mutually constitutive nature of human interaction with the non-human world.

Degrowth as social analysis reproduces an industrial-era imaginary of humans possessing limitless need. For example, in the passage quoted above, Kallis (2017, 4) argues that it is problematic to plan to “satisfy the use values of the people” if that entails negative social and environmental consequences. The problem is that the term “use values” in this sense invokes a static, essentialized conception of human needs. Kallis subsequently recognizes that needs are fundamentally shaped by culture but relies on technological determinism to do so: “The economic forces that promise to transcend scarcity are also the ones that increase needs together with production, ensuring that there is not, and there will never be, enough for everyone” (Kallis 2017). What Kallis overlooks is that needs are constructed within matrices of meaning and social relations. Capitalism stimulates endless needs through devices such as planned obsolescence and commodity fetishization, as well as by pulverizing our sense of individual identity and self-worth. Indeed, the overproduction of need is central to how scarcity under capitalism is produced.

By perpetuating a cosmology of the nature-culture binary and an imaginary of limitless need degrowth makes an implicit appeal to political authority. After all, someone must determine the “limits” of nature, just as someone must be empowered to enforce its checks. As sociologist Markantonatou (2013) notes, so long as the central problematic continues to be framed as indulgence, the solution continues to present itself as restraint. Again, although degrowth has mostly shied away from eco-authoritarianism, it naturalizes political authority as a necessity and provides an explanation of social and ecological crises as failures of collective self-restraint rather than as products of particular institutions.

Social Ecology: Rethinking Socialism and Growth

Social ecology’s perspective on history and social development can help us overcome some of the limits of the degrowth approach. Social ecology was first introduced by leftist social theorist Bookchin (1931–2006), with the central thesis that all ostensibly ecological or environmental problems are rooted in the problem of social hierarchy. This rooting occurs on both a material and an epistemic level. Materially, social exploitation of human by human motivates and drives human exploitation of the natural world. Epistemically, the notion that human beings can dominate nature stems from this very real domination of human beings over one another (Bookchin 1982). In order to address the current global ecological crisis, we must dismantle hierarchical society in general, and not simply capitalism. This

means the solution to ecological crisis lies not with the limitation or containment of society, but rather with its liberation.

Social ecology presents an alternative to the nature-culture binary by historicizing society within nature (Heller 1999). Building on predecessors such as Élie Reclus and Pyotr Kropotkin, social ecology frames society as a distinct yet integrated outgrowth of organic evolution. This overarching historical development, of which society is a part, bends toward increasingly higher degrees of subjectivity and consciousness (Bookchin 1993). That is, throughout natural evolution, we can see a trajectory toward more complex organisms which, through the process of natural evolution, exhibit increasing degrees of intelligence, self-direction, and sociality. The self-consciousness of human beings, which mediates the development of society, is a product of natural evolution. Consequently, the wellbeing of society is tied to ecological wellbeing not simply because we require a biological environment to survive, but because society is an outgrowth of natural evolution itself. In conclusion, social and ecological wellbeing are one and the same.

Human intervention into the natural world is not necessarily destructive. In fact, humans can and have greatly enriched their non-human environments. The Redwood Forests and the Great Plains are just two examples of ecosystems that were fostered by millennia of human stewardship. Indeed, there are few ecosystems on this planet that have not been profoundly and fundamentally shaped by human intervention. Permaculture provides another example of ecological design and technology that provides an abundance of food and goods for people, while also enriching the non-human ecosystem. The current ecological catastrophe is the result of a particular kind of society that systematically denigrates and simplifies human and non-human worlds in the service of an exceedingly powerful yet tiny global elite. It is thus entirely possible, especially provided the awesome technological capacities we possess today, for human beings to live healthy, abundant, and meaningful lives without denigrating the natural world.

The point is not that nature doesn't have meaningful boundaries or breaking points, but rather that, in determining the causes and dynamics of ecological crisis, they are secondary to the quality of social relations which animate institutions. Scarcity is produced. For this reason, social ecology advocates a transformational economic outlook whereby individuals are free to choose what they need. As Bookchin (1982) so eloquently states in *The Ecology of Freedom*, "The problems of needs and scarcity, in short, must be seen as a problem of selectivity—of choice. In a truly free society ... needs would be formed by consciousness and by choice, not simply by environment and toolkits" (69).

From the perspective of social ecology, the notion of growth has liberatory potential. Capitalist society has imposed a hegemonic picture of growth as endless accumulation and expansion of private property. Kallis agrees that

this measure of human progress ought to be rejected. Yet we need not also abandon technology, leisure, or material comfort. A society living along social-ecological principles would “grow” in ways that foster qualitative development and enrichment. For example, the worker cooperative network Cooperation Jackson in Jackson, Mississippi use an alternative model of growth based upon the deliberations of popular assemblies. Although this project falls outside Kallis’ technical definition of “growth,” such popular, alternative understandings are relevant to social movements because the current situation does not demand further restraint and restriction upon human society, but rather its release from the dynamics of hierarchy and domination.

Toward a New Meaning of Socialism

Social ecology’s insights into hierarchy, society, and the natural world also elicit reconsideration of the meaning of socialism. The 20th century witnessed the failure of socialism in its classical conception to solve the problem of capitalist expansion. Social democracy, which seeks socialism through gradual reform, likewise appears today more incapable than ever of curtailing neoliberal austerity, neocolonialism, and extractivism, or of stymieing the rising tide of fascism. These movements focused too narrowly on economistic concerns and failed to adequately address the personal, social and political expressions of hierarchy in our current society. Because the root of our present ecological crisis is hierarchy, the solution must encompass far more than the dissolution of capitalism.

Fortunately, today we are witnessing the beginning of a new paradigm of libertarian socialism led by grassroots social movements such as the Zapatistas in Mexico and the Rojava Revolution in Northern Syria. Drawing from socialism’s legacy of council communists, autonomist movements, and anarcho-communists, as well as from indigenous political movements, anti-colonial struggles, and feminism, this growing movement advocates popular governance through assemblies, councils, leagues, and confederations. Their vision, which eschews broad-sweeping, national economic agendas in favor of popular determination, provides a renewed meaning to socialism for the 21st century.

How would such a socialism relate to degrowth? The answer depends on how we interpret the human potential and humanity’s relationship to the natural world. If we believe that scarcity is natural and that society needs to be controlled, the imperatives for economic degrowth and libertarian socialism come into conflict. However, if we believe that human beings are part of nature and are disposed to think and act generatively within it, libertarian socialism would bring about the ecologically sustainable future that degrowth advocates seek. Degrowth, when coupled with an enlarged perspective of

humanity's relationship to the natural world, has a great deal to offer this growing liberatory alternative.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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